

Wellness Notes

Taste*

(Part III)

Symptoms and Diagnosis of Taste Disorders

There are several different types of taste disorders depending on how the sense of taste is affected. People who have taste disorders usually lose their ability to taste or can no longer perceive taste in the same way. The most common true taste complaint is "phantom taste perception" -- tasting something when nothing is in the mouth. Some people have hypogeusia, or the reduced ability to taste. This disorder is usually temporary. True taste disorders are rare. Most changes in the perception of food flavor result from the loss of smell. Still other people can't detect taste at all, which is called ageusia. This type of taste disorder can be caused by head trauma, surgical procedures, radiation therapy, and infections. People with taste disorders experience a specific ageusia of one or more of the five taste categories: sweet, sour, bitter, salty, and umami or "savory."

If you think you have a taste disorder, try to identify and record the circumstances surrounding it. Ask yourself the following questions:

- When did I first become aware of it and what changes in my taste do I notice?
- Do all foods and drinks taste the same?
- Have there been any changes in my sense of smell?
- Does the change in taste affect my ability to eat normally?

Bring this information with you when you visit the doctor. Also, be prepared to tell him or her about your general health and any medication you are taking. Your doctor may ask if you recently have had a cold or the flu. Sometimes these conditions can affect taste. After a complete medical history and physical examination, your doctor may run special tests to find out what type of taste disorder you have and how serious it is.

Some tests are designed to measure the lowest concentration of a chemical that a person can detect or recognize. Your doctor may ask you to compare the tastes of different chemicals or to note how the intensity of a taste grows when the chemical's concentration is increased.

If you think you have a taste disorder, see your doctor. The correct diagnosis by a trained health professional can provide reassurance that your problem is not imaginary.

Loss of taste can be a sign of a more serious condition. It also can deprive us of an early warning system that most of us take for granted. Taste helps us detect spoiled food and beverages. Perhaps more serious, loss of the sense of taste can lead to depression and a reduced desire to eat. This can be especially serious for older people with chronic illnesses.

Diagnosis of a taste disorder is important because once the cause is found your doctor may be able to treat your taste disorder. Many types of taste disorders are reversible, but, if not, counseling and self-help techniques may help you cope.